

Testimony in Opposition to portions of An Act Concerning Relief of State Mandates on School Districts, Raised Bill 1142

March 23, 2009

Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and other members of the Education Committee I am Kerry Swift. I'm here testifying today as both a member of the Connecticut Foundation for Environmentally Safe Schools (ConnFESS) and as a parent of three children in the Brookfield Public Schools. I oppose section 6 and 7 of Raised Bill 1142 because it will erode our parental right to know, and Section 4 (d) (1) has the potential to place an additional burden on the parents of children requiring Special Education.

Firstly, in section 4 (d) (1) by placing the burden of proof on the party requesting the hearing, you're going to ensure that hearings aren't fair equitable processes for parents and educators to discuss what's best and most appropriate for a child, but instead are an adversarial process where a parent must hire an attorney.

I am also especially concerned by the new language in Section 6 of this raised bill. It has been nine years since parents in Brookfield discovered our district was not abiding by the laws regarding management of asbestos in schools and that there were other environmental problems. Much of our time and effort has been expended simply trying to get accurate information regarding operations and maintenance, and even access to test results. We've had to resort to many formal Freedom of Information requests. We've even had to formally request hearings from the Freedom of Information Commission when we've been denied access to paperwork, or simply told required records didn't exist.

This often became an extremely adversarial process, which could have been avoided if the administration had been willing to work with parents and staff instead of stonewalling. An Act Concerning Indoor Air Quality in Schools (the IAQ Bill) was supposed to make pertinent, current information regarding conditions in schools readily available to the public about what, after all, are **our** public buildings. Yet this bill would push reporting to every five years. Why?

Is it really so onerous for a superintendent to ask his Maintenance and Building Supervisor about conditions in the buildings he's responsible for,

and then fill out a check-the-box type form once a year, then submit that form to the State? What we'd really like is for this form to be posted annually on the school or district website. Is that too much to ask?

After all, we're entrusting our children to the district's care; the least we can expect is an annual update as to building conditions and regular updates as to what our children are doing during the day, which will not happen any longer if Section 7 (f) of the statute is deleted. Most of the updates and newsletters I receive in Brookfield are through e-mail, or mailed with report cards. Now with websites so widely used, it's easier than ever for districts and individual teachers to communicate with parents. So, why are we limiting a parent's right to know now? Shouldn't the goal be to include parents and make them partners in their child's education?

I urge the Education Committee to oppose Raised Bill 1142 because I don't believe the sections I've mentioned truly save districts money. At a time in our history when communication technology is exploding at an exponential rate, Connecticut shouldn't take a step backward and limit communication or the amount of information available to parents regarding their children's schools.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.